DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 173 EA 025 791

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TITLE Democracy and Education, Students and Schools.
PUB DATE Feb 94
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Conference "Under Scrutiny Again: What Kind of Secondary Schools Do We Need?" (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, February 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Democracy; *Democratic Values; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Participative Decision Making; Public Schools; *Social Values; *Student Role; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

The meanings and roles of democracy and education, and the interaction of the two, are some of the most difficult questions society faces. The definition of democracy varies widely from a political mechanism to an ideal. Past efforts to infuse democracy into schools have generally been of two types. One is requiring a greater role for teachers in school decision making. The other is greater community involvement or control in education. Research has shown that neither form of school democracy has resulted in much improvement in education or student learning. An alternative to these approaches is that schools must embody democracy and make it a part of education. Democracy must be taught as a characteristic of society, not the individual. Also, it should be more than a political mechanism; at its best it is a way of life. The connection between democracy and education has to do with their common role in a moral view of life. Schools should adopt the norms of democratic practice and foster involvement, reason, and knowledge over rank, tolerance, and community. A new view of students must also be adopted where they are more capable and expected to be involved in their education. (Contains 59 references.) (JPT)

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DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION, STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

Paper Presented to the Conference
"Under Scrutiny Again: What Kind of
Secondary Schools Do We Need?

Simon Fraser University
Vancouver, B.C.
February 24, 1994

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DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION, STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS[1]

This paper is dedicated to Thomas B. Greenfield (1928-1992), of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, whose work has been so important in leading me and many others to think about the central role of values in educational administration.

"I know, but I do not accept. And I am not resigned"

- Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dirge Without Music

Introduction

This paper probes the relationship between democracy and education. I will ask what arrangements for schooling are consistent both with ideals of democracy and with ideals of education. These two words, 'democracy' and 'education' are two of the most highly charged words in our language. In addition to their denotative meanings, they each carry a considerable weight of emotional content. They are value-laden words; thinking about the values which inform these two concepts, what may we say about their linkage in the institution of schooling? In particular, I will focus on the appropriate role and treatment of students in a democratic school. However, I will not approach this problem from the point of view of rights, but from the standpoint of the values of both democracy and education, and what they require of us.

Ideas are shaped by our individual and collective biographies. My own ideas about democracy are affected strongly by growing up in a household where politics was a daily feature at the dinner table, and where children were treated as people whose ideas and opinions mattered. As a high school student I was heavily involved in efforts to organize a students' union among high schools in my community. That experience, in which I discovered that school administrators were at best nervous about and more often highly opposed to a greater role for students in the schools, has also had a powerful impact on my thinking about schools and democracy.

My experience was far from unique. The late 1960s were the heyday of youth protest, of the questioning of institutions and their rules. In the 1960s, Edgar Friedenberg,

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[1]. An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of the Seven Oaks School Division (Winnipeg) Symposium Series. I thank John Wiens and his colleagues for giving me the opportunity to work on these issues. I also wish to thank my colleagues J.A. Riffel and Jon Young for their helpful comments.

Paul Goodman and others wrote about the ways in which schools demeaned students, and made it clear that they - the students - were of no account. Students' ideas, beliefs, thoughts didn't matter. We were simply to do what we were told, and if it didn't make sense, tough.

Nor, it appears, have things changed much. I have recently participated through an electronic discussion list in an exchange of views as to whether students should be able to wear hats in schools. This was a very serious discussion in which school administrators and academics gave all sorts of reasons why schools should prohibit students from wearing hats. I then learned in discussion with my eldest daughter that her elementary school prohibits students from wearing hats.

The Idea of Democracy

There are, of course, many concepts of democracy to be found in the literature, although it is also surprising how often one encounters a piece on democracy in which the term is not defined. One common view of democracy is to see it as formal politics - voting, elections, political parties, and so on. This tendency may be especially strong today, when everything is being compared to a market, and democracy is seen as another market choice, the supply and demand of policies or politicians. And indeed, there is a school of thought in political theory which takes political activity to be a form of consumer preference. Canadian political theorist C.B. Macpherson, who doesn't at all endorse this view, describes it this way: "The purpose of democracy is to register the desires of people as they are, not to contribute to what they might be or might wish to be. Democracy is simply a market mechanism: the voters are the consumers; the politicians are the entrepreneurs" (1977, p. 79).

Another sense of democracy, much more common in education, involves participative processes at the action level. The central idea here is that people should be closely and extensively involved in making decisions which affect them. Alan Pearson, from the University of Alberta, borrowing from Amy Gutmann, described it as follows: "A democratic society, or a participatory democracy... is one in which its members are empowered to make decisions and policies concerning themselves and their society but where such decisions are constrained by the principles of nonrepression and

nondiscrimination..." (1992, p. 84).

Emil Haller and Ken Strike, in An Introduction to Educational Administration (1986), offer a third definition. They describe democracy as a process for making collective decisions in which:

- the wants of each individual are fairly considered
- each individual has a fair influence on the choice (p. 230).

In most definitions of democracy, the key element is people's right or ability to participate in some meaningful way in the making of public decisions. Neither participation nor decision are easy concepts to pin down. Without providing here a careful discussion of these concepts, we can simply note some of the problems. It can be difficult to know when someone has participated. Does this mean having the opportunity to voice an opinion? Or does it mean an opinion which carries influence on a decision? And what would "influence" on a decision mean? The problem of which decisions can legitimately be considered public ones is also troublesome. The language of 'decisions which affect us' is not very helpful, since in some sense almost every decision affects many or us, or even all of us; surely we have learned that from the environmental movement. The boundary between public and private is a difficult one to draw, which is why the question has been of interest to so many philosophers, perhaps especially so to those with an interest in feminism (Greene, 1988: Held, 1984; Stone, 1988). My view is that we have moved too far towards a language of private interests, thus underplaying the important public aspects of many of these same interests. However, as the consequences of the privatization movement of the last decade or so begin to come home, we may well see a greater stress on the public interest as something more than the ability of individuals who can afford it to be free of restraints.

Past Efforts to Extend Democracy in Schools

In schools, advocacy of democracy has usually had one or both of two senses. Some have asserted that educational democracy requires a much greater role for teachers in school decision-making. This idea, quite common twenty years ago, has recently made a resurgence under the heading of teacher empowerment (Fullan, 1991; Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Rice & Schneider, 1992). A second version of school democracy, also strongly

advocated in the 60s and 70s, focused on what was called community involvement or community control. In practice this has often meant the creation of some kind of school council with parent representatives and an advisory or decision role in some school decisions. A greater role for parents in school governance has also reemerged as an issue recently (Davies, 1991).

Extensive efforts, though some may still find them too limited, have been made to put both these conceptions into practice. A number of U.S. jurisdictions have made major steps towards teacher empowerment through various versions of what is called school-based or site-based management, or through other, similar vehicles. Parental involvement, too, has seen a resurgence in recent years, and has witnessed some remarkable experiments in England, in New Zealand, and in parts of the United States such as Chicago.

Without reviewing these efforts in any detail here, I draw the conclusion that neither practice has resulted so far in very much direct significant change in the educational experiences of students. For example, in regard to teacher empowerment, Weiss (1992) studied 12 U.S. high schools, and came to the conclusion that a greater role in decision-making did not lead to very much change in school practices. Murray (1992) found that the move to greater teacher involvement in Rochester had some positive impacts, but that these were quite modest. White (1992) came to a similar conclusion after interviewing 100 teachers in 3 school districts, although she supports increased teacher involvement for other reasons.

In regard to parents, the literature suggests that meaningful involvement in governance is difficult to create and not necessarily very significant when it is put into place (B. Levin, 1982). Canadian evidence is that the creation of school councils in Quebec did not bring very much meaningful parent participation (cited in Fullan, 1991, p. 238). Zeichner (1991) draws similar conclusions about parental involvement in the United States. U.S. research also shows parent councils being dominated by school principals and staff (Malen & Ogawa, 1988). Most importantly, there is no reason to suppose that simply changing governance structures will refocus people's attention onto the important educational issues (H. Levin, 1992).

Much of the literature on teacher and parent involvement, including that already cited, also points out the problems involved in changing governance arrangements. These

include the time required, the conflicts which arise, and the political issues which are often difficult to handle. In short, the creation of democracy is not a simple matter.

Particularly interesting has been the absence of attention in the reform literature of changing the role of students, who continue to be substantially excluded from the discussion about democratizing schools and empowering teachers. There was a movement towards increased student involvement in governance in the 1960s and early 1970s (B. Levin, 1977), but it had little lasting impact. Some efforts have been made since then to create school settings that do give students a major role in governance (Evans, Corsini & Gazda, 1990: Wood, 1990). For example, Lawrence Kohlberg's concept of the "just community" has been taken up in a few schools (Murphy, 1988). But these ideas have been more advocated than practiced; the ERIC system shows more entries for the creation of just communities in prisons than in schools (Carter, 1986)! A few noble experiments may have been made, but lasting effects on the shape of schooling are hard to discern (Watts, 1989). As well, most of these proposals do not make an explicit tie between changes in governance and the educational mission of the school; governance is seen as being related to rather than an essential part of education itself.

There is considerable irony in a reform movement which advocates one kind of practice for its staff, and a very different practice for its clientele (if one can use that term to describe students who, after all, are compelled to attend school) (B. Levin, in press). Yet the test of democratic practice in any institution should rest at least in part on the treatment of the least powerful. In schools, these are students. I will return to this point later in the paper.

An Alternative Perspective

That past efforts to extend democracy in schools have not been unambiguously successful is not necessarily a basis for pessimism about future prospects. Perhaps we have simply been looking for something in the wrong places. We have been focusing on issues of politics and governance, rather than on questions of morality and education. Seeing democracy as essentially a matter of who is involved in which decisions is insufficient, especially in education. In the rest of this paper, I want to lay out an alternative view - that schools must embody democracy in a way that reaches the heart of what education is; that

the concept of education requires a stringent sense of and commitment to democracy. The requirements of democratic life and the nature of education provide mutually reinforcing rationales for this position.

To begin with, we need to add two elements to the formulations of democracy discussed earlier. First, democracy is a characteristic of communities or societies, not of individuals. In understanding democracy, we must stress not just individuals and their actions, but communities or social wholes (Greene, 1988; Stone, 1984). An individual cannot have democracy all alone. It is a problem in much liberal thought that it treats individuals as prior to society, whereas individuals and collectivities are actually inextricably connected. Societies are, it is true, made up of individuals, but those individuals' own identities, sense of meaning, understanding of life - in fact, almost everything about them - is just as much shaped by the collective life they take part in as by any effort of individual will. There are many excellent philosophical treatments of this issue of individuality in a social context in addition to those already cited (Schutz, 1967, 1970; Natanson, 1970; Giddens, 1976). Here I will simply assert it.

Also, democracy should be something more than just arrangements for choosing governments and making rules. At its best it is a way of life. As Macpherson put it (here stating his own view of the matter), democracy is "a quality pervading the whole life and operation of a national or smaller community, or if you like as a kind of SOCIETY, a whole set of reciprocal relations between the people who make up the nation or other unit" (1977, p.5).

In this extended view democracy does still involve individuals and their participation in decisions, but within a larger and fuller concept of a community life and a set of cultural practices. The literature on participation in education, which tends to be concerned with pragmatic or political questions, has generally not given sufficient attention to either point. Yet keeping them in mind it is possible to see strong connections between democracy and education as ideal practices.

The Connection Between Democracy and Education

The connections between democracy and education have to do with their common interest in a particular moral view of human life and human agency. The purposes of

education are essentially moral, being based on attempts to realize certain ideals about human beings. Insofar as schools are places of education, they need to be centrally concerned with what humans should know, do, and be. Gary Fenstermacher (1990) has been among the most eloquent proponents of this view. There are, of course, skills involved in education, such as reading. They are important. But all technical considerations fall within an overaching moral viewpoint. We don't simply want students to be good readers, competent writers, and able calculators. Much more importantly, we want them to have these skills in order to contribute to the betterment of human life. Most teachers understand this even if only intuitively, which is why they give more weight in their evaluations of students to effort and behaviour than they do to test results and other academic measures (CTF, 1992). There is a danger here, it might be added, that teachers stress only some behaviours and come to prefer conformity, obedience and passivity to activism and curiosity (Wentzel, 1991).

Schools also embody a particular point of view as to how the capacity to live a worthwhile life is to be acquired - through learning about ideas and skills. Other routes are clearly possible, but they are not a major part of western schooling. Our schools do not attempt to embody the idea of coming to terms with life through meditation, or through contemplation of the great mysteries, or through physical experience and a great quest, or even, except to a very limited extent, through the arts. All of these are ways of living which have their own legitimacy, and impressive pedigree, but they are something different from schooling. Instead, schools are concerned with the habits of reason and rationality, with the acquisition of information, with the empirical world.

The idea of democracy has the same characteristics. It is a moral conception of how people ought to live together, driven not by considerations of efficiency, but by a powerful vision of what is right and proper. Although arguments of efficiency can be made (and have been made) in defence of democracy, in the end the idea that people should all have a share in political power has to stand on its own merit as an idea - because it appeals to our deep sense of what is right. Churchill's too-famous quote about democracy expresses the deep moral yearning which lies behind the idea of equal participation in political life.

Too, democracy as an ideal rests on a concept of people as reasonable, sufficiently so if not ideally so. If everyone has an entitlement to take part in political life, then it can

only be because everyone has the capacity to come to informed and reasonable judgments about what a society ought to do. If we believed that people were essentially unreasonable, and that appeals to evidence or to reasons for actions were largely useless, then we could not defend democracy. Precisely the same comment could be made about education, which is a sensible undertaking only if one presumes that people have the capacity to grow in understanding through reason.

> To empower people to make decisions requires that they learn to become reflective thinkers who utilize moral principles to prevent repression and discrimination. It would seem to be a central task of education in a society that claims to be democratic in this sense to provide this learning for its members. (Pearson, 1991, p. 87)

The ideas of democracy and of education are inextricably connected, and should be thought of as parts of the same vision. It is no accident that mass education developed at about the same time as the mass electoral franchise. One cannot imagine one without the other.

Combining Democratic and Educational Values

If this argument is accepted, it follows that schools as organizations should embody norms of democratic practice. To do otherwise would be to contradict the very idea of public education. There is, of course, a large body of work which takes the view that schools were never intended to be democratic institutions, but instead were created to serve the function of social control and stratification. Thus the emphasis in schools on obedience and behavior, which often assume more prominence than actual academic achievement. Wentzel cites evidence that "teachers were more appreciative and positive towards students who were cooperative and persistent... than students who were less responsible but displayed high levels of creativity and achievement" (1991, p. 9).

Henry Levin has made the point that schools are more concerned with inculcating in students the requirements of a capitalist economy and hierarchical workplace than they are with developing the skills of democratic living (H. Levin, 1991). Levin's argument is an instance of a well-developed critique of schooling (e.g. Apple, 1990; Connell et al, 1982;

Carnoy & Levin, 1986; Metz, 1988) which has much validity and many important implications which cannot be worked out in detail here. It seems reasonably certain that schools do serve, at least as one of their purposes, to perpetuate existing social and economic practices. But such a conceptualization, while important, is also not the entire truth. A complex institution such as schooling inevitably includes many different ideas about what can and should be done (Silver, 1990). For purposes of this paper, I will simply assert that those who work in schools need to have a more idealistic view. Education is an enterprise which must have some link to the realization of ideals. So even if schools do serve other, less noble purposes, as educators we must be trying to realize the ideals about participation and community which are essential to the idea of education.

But even granted this proposition, we are faced with important questions. What would it mean to embody democratic ideals in schools? Who are the participants in the democracy of the school? Is it staff? parents? the general community? And what should the role of students be in a democratic school? How do we combine the idea of schools as democratic institutions with the idea of schools as places of development? If we begin to examine these questions, we immediately run into difficult and controversial questions of organization and practice.

I prefer to start from another direction. Instead of beginning with organizational arrangements, let us step back to values, and ask what values should be embodied in a school which would be consistent with democracy and with education.

Here is my list. A democratic school would be characterized by the following:

- It would focus on moral principles and questions as being primary over technical ones. This means that those in the school, or involved with the school, would always be asking questions such as, "Is this right? Is this connected with making the world a better place? Is this consistent with principles of justice, caring, and equity?"
- Reason and knowledge would be paramount over rank and authority. We could not use authority as the sole justification for action except under the most dire circumstances, where it is clear that safety or social order are threatened, and even then the authority would have to have been granted in a reasonable way.
- The school and everyone in it would be concerned with having good reasons for all practices. Everything in or about the school would be open to question and change if

convincing reasons could be given. Processes for such debate would themselves be democratically established.

- There would be respect and tolerance for divergent views, and a willingness to understand the views of others and to consider seriously the possibility that others are right while we are mistaken.
- Everyone in the organization would not only tolerate but work actively to create participation in the school by all, which means moving away from a passive notion of citizenship, just as we want to move away from passive model of learning.
- The school would strive to build community and solidarity while also respecting diversity and divergence. These can be seen as mutually reinforcing rather than antithetical. The model is not simply one of constant debate, but also, and equally, as the feminist philosophers have shown us, about caring for each other even as we disagree (Gilligan, 1982; Martin,1985; Noddings, 1984).
- The school would recognize and encourage alternative sources of authority and power. People who are good at things would be recognized for their abilities and contributions, regardless of their position or status in the organization.

This list does not bring to mind an institution which looks much like most present day schools, especially secondary schools. There are undoubtedly people in our schools who believe in values much like these, and strive to practice them. Education includes some of the most committed democrats anywhere. Some schools go a considerable way towards meeting at least some of these principles.

Individual efforts, however, are not enough. The general institutional form of our schools, and the general way power is organized in them, makes it very difficult to operate classrooms or individual schools in accord with these principles. Indeed, many of the standard practices of schools are quite inconsistent with principles of democracy.

It may be helpful to cite some evidence that schools presently often fail to embody principles of democracy. Cedric Cullingford interviewed 110 English students who were at the end of primary or the beginning of secondary school. A major theme of his book is the exclusion of students from discussion about what school is for and about. He concludes that students are not informed, let alone consulted, about what is being done to them and why.

> Children go to school because they have to. It is part of the preordained experience... Very rarely, if ever, is the purpose of school discussed with children. They go to school without deeply questioning why they should... Teachers simply do not spend time engaged in delineating why things need to be learned. (1991, p.159).

Nor does the situation improve much as students get older and, presumably, more mature. Ironically, in many ways elementary students, and particularly those in primary years, have more control over what they do and how they do it than at any other time in their school careers. Michelle Fine's study of dropouts in a New York high school documented the extent to which critique and dissent were stifled in that setting (1991). Many other qualitative or ethnographic studies of schools have had similar findings. On a larger scale, John Goodlad's huge study of U.S. schools in the early 1980s came to these conclusions about secondary schools.

> The picture that emerges from the data is one of students increasingly conforming, not assuming an increasingly independent decision-making role in their own education.
>
> On one hand, many teachers verbalize the importance of students increasingly becoming independent learners; on the other, most view themselves as needing to be in control of the decision-making process. (1984, p. 109)
>
> Students in the classes we observed made scarcely any decisions about their learning... (1984, p. 229).

The current status and treatment of students in our schools has particularly important implications for students' political education, for the way they come to understand the nature of politics, whether at the national level or at the micro-level of the classroom or the family. At precisely the age when young people are formulating their political views, they are in an institution in which they have no political rights and no political role. Bad enough that so little effort is given to having students deal with real world issues of power,

politics or poverty in ways that actually raise what is controversial in our public life. Even worse that what is done is almost entirely an exercise divorced from any practical consequences other than students' grades. Students simply do not get a chance to practice the skills of democratic living.

Cullingford, although his book is not primarily about politics, has this to say.

> Although children are deemed to have little interest in politics, they all express political views, and learn their political atittudes just at a time when little ostensible attention is given to them... They learn about power and authority and the ways in which human beings organize themselves, which is the stuff of politics. No one can escape the consequences of the need for the translation of social action into a means of control and organization. Children are as capable as the indifferent voter of having political insights (Cullingford, 1991, p. 176).

Moving from this state of affairs towards the principles outlined earlier would require very significant changes in the way schools operate. Democracy in schools, in this view, is far more than school-based management, or school councils, or teacher empowerment. The political role of teachers would certainly be expanded considerably under a set of values such as those described. The change in authority patterns would mean that principals and school district administrators could no longer simply give instructions; rather, issues in the school would have to be settled by educational means - through discussion and dialogue.

Curriculum could not only be something determined by experts - whether teachers or others - and passed on to students as something they should learn without question. Relationships among all parties in the school would need to be much more respectful. Just as administrators would need to be willing to engage in discussion with staff about policies and practices, so would teachers and administrators need to have the same sort of openness to students. A school could no longer be a place in which a few made up the rules which governed the many without any consent from the latter. Students would need to be active creators of the school rather than its passive beneficiaries, not simply within the curriculum

framework, but in the total life of the school. They would have to take on the real challenges of living, not the artificial ones of textbooks.

Implications of the Democratic School

Well, one might say, how much can we expect? Do other institutions do better? Aren't these expectations unreasonable?

In one sense, they probably are. After all, the world is a pretty imperfect place. Our existing political institutions, most of us would agree, are far from ideal, either in conception or in practice. Why should we expect schools to be better political institutions than are our overtly political institutions, such as political parties? Yet in another, more important way, we are right to hold schools up to expectations which are especially high and especially difficult to meet. Precisely because schools have charge of young people, and precisely because schools play an important role in the formation of young people (the French word, 'formation', has no precise English translation but embodies something much more akin to the shaping of character than do the English words 'education' or 'training') they have to meet obligations beyond those pertaining to institutions dealing only or mostly with adults.

At present, while teachers already have some importance in the school, though perhaps less than they would want or merit, students have virtually none. They are compelled to attend school. Once there, they are told what to study, when to study it, and how to behave. They typically have little, if any, role in setting the rules under which they must live. The standards of due process and natural justice which we consider normal and necessary for staff in the school are usually not applied to students. For example, while there are generally careful safeguards about how teachers are to be evaluated, the evaluation of students, which has potentially much greater impact on their futures, provides few of these safeguards (B. Levin, in press a).

If we think of democracy as a way of life in which communities make choices through processes involving all their members, we can see that in schools students are not thought of in this way. They are not considered to be partners in a community. Instead, our dominant metaphor for schooling is that of the factory, with students cast usually as the raw materials to be processed. Schooling is organized to have things done to students

according to somebody else's plan of what will produce the desired results. If one takes this view it makes no sense to ask the materials if they wish to be part of the product. Yet it seems evident that a factory metaphor is very far from a democratic world-view (B. Levin, in press b).

Are Students Capable?

A change in the status of students to full partners in their own education will not come easily. Several objections may be raised. Some authors talk about democracy in schools entirely instrumentally, to be justified only if it serves to prepare the young for living in a democratic society.

> The question of how much democracy within schools is desirable remains doubly difficult to answer, therefore, because we have incomplete data on the educative effects of more democratic methods and because we rightly value the disciplinary as well as the participatory purposes of primary education.
>
> Without more empirical evidence, we cannot say precisely how much democracy in schools is desirable... (Guttman, 1987, p. 91

I find this position difficult to understand. It treats democracy as a matter of effective technique. It is inconsistent with the idea of democracy, which is not about preparation for living, but about living. A former basketball coach of mine used to say that "Some people think sports is good preparation for life, but that's nonsense. Sports is life." Sport is as much life as any other human activity, and so is being a student in school. We make a mistake when we think of school as simply instrumental - a place to learn how to live through some sort of technical process of being taught (Dewey, 1968 [1938] p. 49). It's not as if students spend ten or twelve years preparing for life while doing something else. Instead, we should see students as being at all times active constructors of their worlds, and in this case how they live is a critical feature of any curriculum.

Democracy in schools is not a matter of how best to train people in some sort of skill, with the decision as to how much democracy to have resting on empirical evidence. What kind of empirical evidence would we gather, after all? Are we to assess whether

students make good decisions when given the chance? But how would we know? Are we to assess whether they learn more geography or read more books when in a democratic setting? Indeed, it seems highly doubtful to say that democracy is justified at all on the basis of empirical examination of its outcomes. Would we say that the decision about how much democracy to have in our society is empirical? If it turned out that better outcomes - whatever that might mean - occurred when only the elite made decisions, would we discontinue democracy as a political practice and embrace absolutism?

We can only learn to live in a democracy by living in one. Like most skills, political participation cannot be learned solely by studying it. One must also engage in it. This is an idea at least as old as Aristotle. Yet schools, far from giving young people the chance to develop political knowledge and skills, actively prevent them from doing so by treating them as incompetent, and by denying them any effective political role in shaping their own education.

> Could anyone really expect to promote equality, intrinsically meaningful learning, and accomplishments that will enhance the lives of others by telling people the way things are, by training them to do things "our" way, and by giving them low grades if they do not see the light? (Nicholls, 1989, p. 208).

There is a strong case to be made for students of all ages having the same rights, political and otherwise, as adults (see Cohen, 1980, for an extended and careful argument along these lines, and Callan, 1988, for a somewhat more conventional position). But here I am not going to make that case. Nor will I argue for democracy because of its economic importance (Carnoy & Levin, 1985), even though I have argued elsewhere that improvements in the outcomes of schooling require a much stronger and more central role for students (Levin, in press b). Rather, I am arguing here for democracy in schools, especially for students, from the point of view of what is required for educational reasons. Schools, because they are educational institutions, have particular obligations in regard to their political arrangements; requirements which go beyond those of other institutions. Amy Gutmann has suggested that we ought to direct our attention away from whether high schools prepare students for jobs, and pay more attention to whether they prepare students

with the capacity to participate in the decisions that determine the future of high schools, of the labour market, and of our social arrangements (1987, p. 148).

The objection will also be made that students are incapable of playing a more important part in the operation of schools. It will be argued - it has often been argued (the arguments are reviewed in Wright, 1983; Wringe, 1984; and Callan, 1988) - that an institution centrally concerned with children must have an essentially paternalistic orientation. Since children are immature, and do not know what is good for them, adults must make these determinations whatever the children may think. After all, we wouldn't let children eat as much candy as they wanted, or run out into the road as ways of demonstrating their equality as persons, would we? Isn't it farcical to give students the authority to make decisions which they clearly aren't ready to make? As Gutmann, who is generally favourable towards student participation in schools, put it, "Students lack the competence necessary to share equally in making many decisions" (1987, p.88). Zeichner (1992), although a strong advocate of greater democracy in schools, includes students rather as an afterthought, and then only at the secondary level. Even John Dewey's model schools left many of the key decisions to teachers with no student role (Gutmann, 1987, p. 93).

Certainly we need to take into account in organizing schooling the nature and needs of children. Yes, we do have legal responsibilities, and, even more importantly, ethical ones towards students - the obligation to help students make good decisions, and the obligation to intervene when danger exists. But we can wonder whether these obligations also require such a thorough-going authoritarianism as characterizes our schools.

It is not clear why competence is a criterion at all for students' participation in schools. In our political system competence is not the requirement for participation or the right to participate. We are entitled to vote at a certain age whether or not we know anything about politics. We have legal rights regardless of our knowledge and worth as persons. Indeed, that is a key part of what it means to have a right. It is, then, not evident why students should have to demonstrate competence to merit political participation when adults do not.

Are students ready to play an active role in determining the nature of schooling? The danger of abuse does exist. It is possible that students would massively opt for less

demanding programs, although this is a pessimistic assumption without much evidence to support it. Where students do have some choice - in secondary school - they often want to take the more demanding programs and have to be dissuaded by staff who feel they aren't able to handle them. This hardly suggests that students will usually take the easy way out. Anthony Polan thinks that the real problem is not one of avoiding chaos, but of how seldom institutional arrangements are altered significantly, and how often "potentially radical reorganizations and restructuring of institutions results in relatively conservative outcomes" (1989, p.43).

We must ask what it means to be ready to exercise authority. Who is ready, and who decides? The argument about lack of readiness or lack of maturity has been used historically to oppose every proposal to extend political rights. It has been used to justify and support colonialism, the dismal treatment of aboriginal peoples, the denial of voting and property rights to women, and, until the last couple of centuries, democracy itself. Every group which now has a political role was at one time excluded on the grounds of lack of capacity. Looking at the North American political culture, we might well wonder whether we as adults are ready for democracy. Are we mature enough? Are we too ready to opt for the easy choice? Is it reasonable to think that young people will be significantly worse at it?

We should also recognize that interest "grows by what it feeds on". Callan points out that it is hardly surprising that students will not devote time and effort to becoming skilled at something which they aren't allowed to do in any case (1988, p.141). A meaningful political role is likely to be a considerable spur both to political interest and political skill. It isn't only that practice is required to develop certain skills and dispositions, but also that the absence of opportunity to use such capacities will likely lead to a disinterest in them.

In education the argument about readiness is particularly doubled-edged. If students, after eight or ten years of school, have not yet learned to take part in political debate, to justify a point of view, to hear and understand the views of others, and to recognize reasonable and unreasonable choices, is that not a failure of schooling? After all, these skills - critical thinking, making choices, tolerance for diversity - are among the most important goals of school. If we havn't been able to develop them in students over these

years, what does that say about our educational practices (Callan, 1988)?

We cannot have it both ways. If schooling is important because of the role it plays in developing skills, then it should be evident that those skills are developing, and the means of seeing this is to allow students to use those skills in ways that really matter. If, on the other hand, we claim that skills such as critical thinking are largely a function of age - that one simply doesn't develop them until 18 or 21, or whatever age - then we cannot use the importance of these skills as a grounds for defending schooling. Why should people invest in schools if such key abilities are not, in fact, learned there?

No doubt some of the views expressed or decisions made by students will not be, in the eyes of some adults, good ones. Young people will make mistakes, just as we do - probably in about the same proportions. But here the idea of education is important, since educational values require that people have the opportunity to learn from their actions, which will inevitably include their mistakes. It would be a very peculiar sort of education which prevented people from doing things on the grounds that they might make a mistake. Choice should be limited only in situations where some very serious damage may be sustained.

What To Do With Authority?

We also need to be clear about the possible problems of paternalism. All political systems and human institutions involve an unavoidable problem of power. Glenn Tinder framed the problem when he wrote that "A political system is essentially a set of arrangements by which some people dominate others. How can this be made morally tolerable? Civilization is carried on under a great moral shadow." (Tinder, 1991, p.162). Peter Berger described the problem even more starkly, writing that

> At the foundations of every historical society there are vast piles of corpses... There is no getting away from this fact, and there is nothing to be done about it. It is an inevitable burden of the human condition (1974, p. 150)

We cannot wish the problem of authority away. And we certainly cannot depend, as history shows only too clearly, on the goodwill of those in authority to exhibit

characteristics of care and concern for those in their charge. Whether one considers the historic behaviour of monarchs or dictators, or the widespread existence of violence and abuse in present-day families, Lord Acton's dictum about the corruptions of power remains forceful. Nor are these problems unique to politics or the family. Similar evidence can be adduced in regard to schools. We have only to look at the literature on tracking, on placement in special education, and on disciplinary practices to see that adults in schools do, disturbingly frequently, make decisions about students which are not in the students' best interests. Donald Schon has written that

> There is no reason to suppose that professionals can be trusted to perceive the coerciveness of the institutions they represent; and even when they perceive it, there is no reason to suppose that professionals alone can act effectively to change the directions of institutional behaviour (1983, p. 349)

Even if we assumed that every educator was solely driven by a perception of students' best interests it would be surprising if their (our) understandings of those interests were always more accurate than the understandings of the students themselves. Think of how we react when others presume to tell us what is best for us. Even where there are clear technical grounds for expertise, such as medical diagnosis, we are frequently distrustful, and always reserve the right to a second opinion. Moreover, in most circumstances a doctor cannot undertake a procedure without our explicit consent, even though the doctor has expertise which we do not. Yet schools are authorized to, and frequently do take actions which students see as wrong for them.

There may be problems with the wider distribution of authority to students, although I believe that these problems are overstated, but there are obviously enormous problems with the concentration of authority, also. If we are to give attention to the problems of wider democracy, we must also be open about the dangers of concentrated power.

Restrictions on students in school should therefore be such as are consistent with the ideals listed earlier, which apply both to democracy and to education. They should be consistent with evidence and careful argument as to why students are being treated differently from adults. It is not at all evident that students are as incompetent as is

claimed, nor that their political rights should be affected even if they are.

Let us note as well that nothing said so far suggests that schooling should be turned over to students. The principles listed earlier do not assign primacy to any particular group in the school; they only suggest that every group and every person has a right to participate in the work of the institution. I do not advocate giving students all the authority over schooling any more than I advocate giving all the authority to teachers, administrators, parents, elected officials, or any other group. Teachers will always need to have a particularly important role to play - more important than is currently the case in many schools - in influencing and shaping what happens in schools. Parents and other community members also have a right and an obligation to participate. Each group, each individual, must take into account the views and desires of others. We cannot always have our own way, whether in political life or anywhere else. That is a fact which children learn very early.

Education is not about giving authority to any particular group to make decisions. Education has to do with the creation of situations in which there is debate and discussion, in which people learn about what to do, and in which decisions are subject to challenge, and to the requirement to give good reasons, taking into account others as full, human persons who deserve respect (Greene, 1988). Democracy in schools must itself be educational, having to do with learning more, gathering and weighing evidence, working through what might constitute good reasons for believing something, coming to understand and appreciate why others might hold a different view - in short, all those things which we rightfully expect an educated person to do. It involves learning to put aside for the moment one's own views and interests to think seriously about those of others (Wringe, 1984, p. 62). This applies to students no more and no less than to teachers, administrators, parents, or other community members. The concept of the reflective thinker in a reflective community is both democratic and educational.

We should also note that students do not participate as some sort of detached individuals, but in a social context which has powerful influences on their thinking. We shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that individual desires precede society. The two are part of the same whole. The way in which school as an organization is shaped will therefore influence how people participate, what they see as desirable, and what views they

express (Bellah et al., 1991).

We discovered in the 1960s and 1970s that you can't give authority away, despite all our talk about group process and facilitation. My ideas on this subject have been heavily influenced by the work of Bill Torbert. Torbert writes that when one is in a position of authority, one cannot simply pretend that the authority is not there, or that it is equally distributed (Torbert, 1991). Such pretence confuses everyone. Instead, one can only be open about one's role, and enable or invite others to change the pattern of authority by assuming more for themselves. We can hold out the possibility, but others must act to realize it. As his book illustrates, Torbert did more than talk about this idea; he embodied it in the organization of the courses he taught, one of which I took some years ago. Some students found this experience troubling while others (including me) saw it as a tremendous piece of education, combining as it did theory and practice, sociology and poetry, and any number of other diverse elements, all for a class of well over a hundred students.

We cannot abolish authority, or give it away, but we can and should create in our institutions the conditions which allow authority to be challenged, and to be taken over by others who are ready to use it well, because this is what is required for a democratic society to operate. The analogy holds very well in education. Good teachers have natural authority, just as good administrators do (by "good" I mean people acting from deeply moral convictions with deep regard for the other as a full human being). Where authority is exercised in this way, with concern and care for others, there is rarely a challenge to it. Indeed, acting from moral conviction and personal concern is a source of authority. The massive obedience of students in our schools shows clearly that students are disposed to accept the authority of adults as reasonable and legitimate. Cullingford (1991) points out that children do accept the need for rules and authority in the school. Nor do we find in settings where children do have more autonomy, such as private lessons or social activities, that they engage any more than do adults in widespread disobedience or efforts to render the activity meaningless in the service of some immediate pleasure.

Again, the nature of schools as places of education brings a further dimension to the discussion, because the process of education itself carries implications for authority. Colin Wringe has pointed out that "...education is democratic to the extent that both teachers and pupil are subject to the canons of whatever discipline is being explored. A good argument

or a relevant piece of evidence is still as good or relevant when brought forward by a mediocre student as when the same argument or evidence is produced by an outstandingly well qualified teacher..." (Wringe, 1984, p. 83). Gary Fenstermacher (1990) has made the point that teachers must seek to make their students authoritative in their place. Teaching consists of giving knowledge away such that the student becomes as knowledgeable or competent, and preferably even more so than the teacher. Teachers begin from a superior status in terms of knowledge (though not a superior status as a person), but seek deliberately to make the students their equals. In this important sense, teachers should always be seeking to give authority away, and it is difficult to see how this can be done if the students do not play an active role in all phases of their education.

What Might be Done?

Just how this altered view of the role of students would take shape in practice is not simple. Education has such wide implications and so many people have a stake in it. There are limits to democracy in education, as there are in every other area of political life. The limits are those imposed by our sense of what education is and requires. Because everyone has an interest in education, decisions cannot simply be made by teachers, or teachers and students, or even teachers, students and parents, let alone by administrators, who have a very shaky claim to decision-making power except insofar as it is delegated by public bodies such as school boards (Haller & Strike, 1986). The reconciliation of education and democracy rests not on an organization chart which shows who is superior to whom, but on a vision of a society in which reflection, dialogue, critical thinking, and mutual care are central. Within this framework, people can and do come to decisions which recognize the authority of expertise, or which empower certain roles or persons with particular authority, because that is seen as being desirable in the interests of all. There is no requirement that a democratic organization be one in which every decision is debated endlessly, and in which everyone plays an identical role, as long as other arrangements are themselves the result of democratic processes (Wringe, 1984, p. 65). Whatever form we adopt will have problems, and will need review and change from time to time. The key is less the organizational form than the ideals it embodies.

It is clear from the historical evidence (Watts, 1989) that schools which have attempted to alter their political nature in important ways have faced enormous obstacles. The apparently small impact of the student power movement of the 1960s, or of the Kohlberg "just community" concept illustrate the same dynamic. Some of the problems are internal, as those involved try to come to terms with arrangements quite different from those they may be used to. The literature on change cited earlier makes frequent mention of the difficulties involved. When success proves elusive people may become disenchanted and lessen their effort. But the obstacles are not only internal. The external pressures to conform to the existing image of schooling are even more powerful; many schools which set out on an independent course were eventually forced back to doing more or less the same thing as everybody else. So we don't necessarily know how to create a democratic school, and it is not at all certain that such a creation would be allowed to continue even if it could be brought about. There should be no naievete that a simple call for democracy will actually bring results in practice; the history of education is littered with injunctions to schools which were never fulfilled (and perhaps often so much the better).

Nonetheless, there are some steps that could be taken by individuals - teachers or administrators - that would not likely produce great resistance, and that would do much to move schools in the directions outlined here. Many of these things can be done quite readily, in a single class or an entire school. All of them proceed from a dual commitment - to make education an important part of democracy and democracy an important part of education. Probably the most important step is to make a practice of raising with students, in classes and other settings, the central issues of schooling as propositions to be discussed seriously, but without evident right answers. We can start to treat students as community members with a stake in what happens, and as people who can and will learn as they deliberate and act. We could encourage discussion within the school community about all those educational matters which require thought and are open to different points of view, such as curriculum content and organization, grading and student evaluation practices, the merits and place of critical thinking, the role of political education, how best to handle controversial issues, and so on. All of these, subjects of debate for educators and informed parents, could and should be made problematic for students as well, so that they, too, confront the question of what education is. Taking this approach would

tell students that what they thought mattered, and that the quality of their thought was important, thereby encouraging active learning. Students would also learn that answers to important questions are always provisional, subject to changes in our knowledge, purposes, circumstances and values.

The literature contains descriptions of many ways to organize such practices of inquiry (Duke & Jones, 1985). At the simplest level, it is always possible to begin in a classroom by asking students to talk about what their interests and concerns are. What bothers them about the school? What would they like to change if they could? What ideas do they have for making schools more educational? Listening with real attention, asking questions, and asking students to develop their ideas is a start that can be made by any teacher or administrator. These activities require key educational skills - reading, writing, discussing, thinking. One might find as a side benefit that beginning this kind of dialogue gave students a different perspective on their role with fewer disciplinary problems resulting.

A student voice in selecting topics for study, textbooks and readings and evaluation practices could be part of every classroom. Any issue that is important enough to refer to a parent-teacher meeting or to a school board is also likely to be an issue on which students could be consulted. School-wide fora, systems of elected representatives, or referenda (preceded by debate) on important questions are all means of creating and legitimizing discussion on issues that matter. One only needs to look at the political vehicles available in society generally to get ideas about how these can be used in the microcommunity of the school. Development of school or district policies on homework or discipline or tracking or textbooks jointly with students and parents has been done in many schools, and could be extended to become a normal practice rather than something exceptional. The key is to make it normal, even expected, that students would have a reasoned, informed and respected voice in school decisions.

We need also to give real tasks to student organizations. Student councils in secondary schools are seldom involved in the important questions facing the school (or welcomed if they try to involve themselves) (B. Levin, 1977), and in elementary schools student organizations are altogether rare. Work done in both alternative and mainstream secondary schools in Canada and the United States around the development of codes of

students' rights and responsibilities serve as examples of one kind of meaningful political activity that could be replicated in elementary schools as well. Student councils could see and comment on agenda items for staff meetings, or for school board meetings. They could be expected, after a process of involving other students, to make an annual presentation to the school board on educational issues. Students can be given observer status at school or district activities concerned with budgeting, staff development, or curriculum development. Student organizations can have a role in setting disciplinary and other policies in the school is another.

Perhaps most importantly, the practice of democracy should be tied clearly to the school's educational program. Issues of education can become part of the curriculum itself. Almost every social studies guide advocates teaching students about democracy, but usually the means suggested involve simulations or role plays rather than real and meaningful involvement in school decisions. The concept of reflective practice (Schon, 1983) that is so frequently mentioned as important for teachers can equally be a key part of students' learning. Students can be involved in designing courses and learning activities, something that can be done with students of all ages. A colleague who is a school principal recently experimented with having her grade four health class students take over responsibility for the conduct of the course. Within a few classes students were asking to take home the provincial curriculum guide so that they could determine what content needed to be stressed, and how they could best organize the classes! Surely asking students to think about what should be learned, how it should be learned, and how learning should be assessed is part of the creation of reflective learners. Student involvement in developing evaluation activities is particularly relevant, since evaluation has such a powerful impact on the the way students think about school. A larger student role in setting assessment practices is quite consistent with emerging ideas about alternative forms of assessment such as portfolios. Attention to all of these issues could be part of the curriculum of a classroom or school. In preschool and primary, "school" could become a theme along with "seasons", "families", "transportation", or the others currently used. Older students, too, can be asked - indeed, expected - to research, discuss, study and write about their experience of schooling, alternative school practices, and other aspects of education.

These ideas sound simpler in a few phrases than they would be in practice, of course. As I discovered when I moved from being an administrator to being a professor of administration, it is much easier to formulate a perfect world on paper than it is to work in the quite imperfect world of reality. Yet, while it is essential to recognize the limits of the possible, it is equally important to hold onto our ideals despite all the problems and imperfections.

> For a democracy, a soberly realistic stance towards the world paradoxically requires high ideals...But it is part of the human condition that high ideals are often undercut by the means required to pursue them. Our ideals must be deeply enough grounded and richly enough formulated to sustain the arduous debates necessary to determine means acceptable to pursue them, and resilient enough to undergo renewal after their inevitable corruption. (Bellah et al., 1991, p.224).

Will this make our work as educators harder? Absolutely. Will it cause anguish as we try to decide what is right? Yes. There are no simple answers to be given. We will simply have to work hard at it. There are always possibilities if we are serious about wanting them. William Yeats wrote in one of his last poems, **The Circus Animals' Desertion** -

> Now that my ladder's gone
> I must lie down where all the ladders start
> In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

The problems, although daunting, are also exciting. A changed view of democracy in schools would make them more interesting, powerful, meaningful places for everyone. We would truly have an opportunity to try to make our ideals real, and this is what we have to do if we want democracy, and education, to live and prosper.

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